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ABSTRACT

Teachers have a professional/ethical obligation to teach their subject in as balanced a way as possible so that students will not come away with a biased slant that, in their eyes, has been validated by the school system. The teaching of social studies, especially history, would be impoverished if matters of religious beliefs and influences were omitted by a faulty understanding of the First Amendment. In secondary schools, teaching about religion will require the most work, and have the greatest impact, in the social studies curriculum. This paper warns teachers against gross generalizations of religions and the joining of religion to values groups. The teacher should engage in sufficient study to get comfortable with any religious tradition or belief, whether or not he/she agrees with it. Some ways to integrate teaching about religion into courses are to: take advantage of continuing education courses to learn more about the world's religions; encourage school districts to offer inservice education for all teachers faced with the responsibility of teaching about religion; select a textbook that appropriately addresses the religious influences into the history/culture being studied; and develop a written-out procedure for dealing with complaints. (BT)

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James S. Ackerman

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1

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2

The Ethics of Teaching about Religion in the Public Schools

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February 12, 2000

I. Teachers of any subject matter have a professional/ethical obligation to teach that subject in as balanced a way as possible, so that students will not come away with a biased slant that, in their eyes, has been validated by the school system. For courses in art or English/world literature, for example, whenever it's important, the religious context (or literary allusions) presupposed in the work (or, in some cases, held by the artist/writer) should be clearly explained. The teaching of social studies, especially world/American history, would be mightily impoverished if all matters of religious beliefs and influences were bracketed out by a faulty understanding of the First Amendment (Schempp decision). For example:

   a. Governor Bradford's "new Jerusalem, city set on a hill" speech on the Mayflower.
   b. Declaration of Independence as influenced by both Enlightenment and Judeo-Christian ideals.
   c. Jefferson vs. Franklin proposals re the U.S. seal (divided waters of the Exodus; pillars of fire and cloud leading from the wilderness into a promised land).
   d. Gettysburg and Second Inaugural addresses.
   e. Contemporary America no longer a predominantly Protestant country, as it might have been 150 years ago; there's now a huge variety, with diverse groups whose religious beliefs and practices should be understood and respected because they are integral to their culture, and further, Americans are increasingly making these religions their own—e.g., Buddhism, Islam, Zen. And how about religions that are indigenous to America, but whose beliefs and ways of life are largely misunderstood by a majority of Americans (e.g., Mormons, Pentecostals)?
   f. Influence of religion and religious groups on politics
   g. Religious roots of civil rights and peace movements
   h. Spread of cults, many having a strong millennial emphasis, e.g., the public perception of the Waco group.

II. In the secondary schools, the teaching about religion will require the most work, and have the greatest impact, in the social studies curriculum. Not every religious tradition need be given equal time—decisions regarding what to include should come from the teacher, and should be determined by the major religious influences of the particular time period being studied (or, for teachers in other fields, the particular literary text or art work). I think that it should be done on an ad hoc basis, as the occasion arises, as part of the unit on, say, the civil war. Further, there is an ethical obligation to point out both the positive and negative influences that religious beliefs have had, while avoiding the generalization that tradition A is always demonic, or that religion in general produces only negative effects.

III. There's a major distinction, I think, between the "teaching about religion" that I am talking about and what I understand to be meant in "teaching values." In the kinds of courses I envision, where the teaching of religion is grounded in the results of respected academic research, with every attempt made to be objective, values issues will indeed arise (e.g., pacifism, when talking about William Penn and the Quakers). More broadly, and in a more multifaceted way, all teachers will have the opportunity to discuss, and to embody, basic values like honesty, justice, and compassion—again, as occasions arise. On the other hand, I find the "teaching of values," at least the way I understand its proponents, to be totally inappropriate within a public school setting—where the teacher works through a list of particular ethical viewpoints or standards of behavior, perhaps ranging from pre-marital sex to abortion to use of drugs, with the view of inculcating certain prescribed values into the students. For those who would argue for the integration of the teaching about religion into the secondary school curriculum, one of the great strategic dangers is if that cause were to be confused with, or seek to join forces with, the teaching of values groups.

IV. One of the teacher's greatest ethical obligation, when it comes to teaching about religion, is to engage in sufficient study to get comfortable with/inside any religious tradition or belief, so that they can teach it sympathetically, whether or not they agree with it.

   a. This involves a huge commitment of time—minimally, a summer of study—because, from what I've heard, when it comes to integrating religion into the social studies curriculum, the current array of textbooks available for purchase by secondary schools is quite barren when it comes to supplying subject matter in the text or even bibliographical suggestions for teachers. Ideally, and perhaps this will happen in the future, schools of education should require Religious Studies as a 3-course minor for social studies teachers; and state certification boards should also recognize the importance for candidates for certification in social studies to have studied about religion so that it would eventually become a requirement for certification.

V. I have just sketched out the kinds of background I think teachers should have in order to live up to the professional standards to which they hold themselves accountable regarding the subject matter they normally cover. How to integrate the teaching about religion into their courses, when appropriate?

   a. Take advantage of educational opportunities offered by national institutes and local continuing education courses to learn more about the world's great religious traditions and about the role of religion in U.S. and world history.

   b. Encourage school districts to offer pre-service and in-service education for all teachers faced with the responsibility of teaching about religion. Such programs should focus on how to teach about religion in ways that are constitutionally permissible, educationally sound, and culturally sensitive.

c. Be familiar with state and local guidelines for teaching about religion in the curriculum.
d. Have clear educational objectives for the inclusion of study about religion in courses where such study may be appropriate.
e. Make certain that administrators, students, and parents understand how and when study about religion will take place in the classroom (and have school-developed/approved guidelines available to help answer questions.
f. Select a textbook that appropriately addresses the religious influences into the history/culture being studied.
g. Solicit community input before final textbook selection is made.
h. Develop a written-out procedure for dealing with complaints.
i. When a protest does arise, focus on the community input procedure through which the textbook selection had been discussed.
j. Church-state separation>issue when protesters want sectarian material in the classroom, want teachers to make religious judgments on their behalf, or want to remove material simply because it conflicts with their religious beliefs. School responses to these intrusions should be public, because they affect the whole community.

VI. Finding Common Ground (3rd edition, 1998. Published by the First Amendment Center, sponsored by the Freedom Forum) makes a few suggestions that I'm not at all sure about, and I'd love to hear the thoughts of all our fellow participants on any of these.

a. Teachers could begin by taking advantage of religious holidays—the whole array of them—as ways of making students more familiar, and thus comfortable, with the beliefs and practices of others. *Often what happens is pairing one of the least significant religious holidays of one tradition with one of the most important of another, thus unfairly trivializing one tradition.*
b. Take complaints very seriously—the public has the right to complain, because, to a considerable extent, the public school curriculum should reflect the views of the community as a whole (unless it is unconstitutional!). *Although educators must be sensitive and responsive to the concerns of parents, under no circumstances should untrained outsiders dictate either the curriculum or the pedagogical approaches used in secondary school courses. What if everyone in a smaller community is a Lutheran, for example?*
c. If something controversial is coming up, inform parents and consider an excusal policy. Church-state separation is not an issue when parents/pupils request an alternative assignment. Teachers/administrators should assume that the parents are doing what they think is best for their children, and should not accuse them of misconstruing the assignment or its impact on the students. Responses in these particular cases should remain private. *If a teacher has been properly trained to provide alternative interpretations or explanations of any controversial issue, high school students will appreciate the*

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integrity of giving the class options to consider and discuss. The teacher should then insist that, in the discussion, no other student make fun of any of the options presented. Warning parents in advance may well create an issue when no issue is really there if a teacher is the professional we believe teachers are.

d. Some issues may be just too controversial to include in the school curriculum. *If this principle were applied to curricular areas outside the teaching about religion, what kind of strangely-shaped curriculum might we have? If schools don't raise controversial issues, who will?*

e. Although of course students should be free to bring in their own perspectives in class discussions or written work, **if relevant**, don't ask students in advance about their own religious backgrounds or beliefs. *Is it not possible that finding students religious backgrounds in advance might make the teacher even more sensitive to including the views interpretations in the discussion, when relevant.*

f. Tell/don't tell the class your own religious tradition or personal beliefs. *I tell students that I will talk with them about my religious beliefs in my office hours, if they are interested, but that my job as a teacher is to try to present, as objectively as possible, the views of different religious traditions. This is a challenging task, and teachers would advance the cause of education by finding out as much as possible about the religious traditions they cover rather than say "I am a Presbyterian" and assume that such information gives students helpful insight into what is going on.*

*The major resources for this paper are:

a) Charles C. Haynes, with Oliver Thomas, John B. Leach, and John E. Ferguson, Finding Common Ground (for copies, write First Amendment Center, 1207 18th Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37212).

b) Thayer S. Warshaw, secondary school teacher of literature, now deceased, with whom I directed the Indiana University Summer Institute on Teaching the Bible in Secondary Literature Courses. Mr. Warshaw's teaching experienced, combined with the feedback I received from over 500 experienced teachers during the ten years of the Institute, have helped me learn what works in teaching the Bible responsibly and properly in a public school environment.

c) My own experience teaching the Hebrew Bible for over 30 years at Indiana University, a state-supported educational institution.

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